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## The Great Ape Project and Disability Rights: Ominous Undercurrents of Eugenics in Action

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The Great Ape Project is an international animal rights movement with the goal of extending rights to nonhuman primates. While the authors of this essay are sympathetic with scholars who seek to ensure humane treatment for these species, they are concerned with the growing tendency by those in the project to draw analogies between nonhuman primates and humans with disabilities. It is felt that scholars in the Great Ape Project, ignoring findings from anthropologists who have begun to study the significant sociocultural matrix that has defined and often limited individuals with disabilities, rely on assumptions about disability that can be traced back to the eugenics movement.

The authors of this essay argue that if scholars in the Great Ape Project want to make comparisons between humans and apes, it should be with all humans. They feel it is both unfortunate and scientifically inaccurate for those in the Great Ape Project to blur the boundary between apes and people by dehumanizing individuals with disabilities, individuals for whom human rights are often the most precarious. [*great apes, Great Ape Project, disability, eugenics, human rights*]

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On the night after Christmas in 1995, British television aired a primetime roundtable debate on whether great apes deserve special rights because of their close genetic affiliation with human beings, their cognitive abilities, and their behavior. Some of the most prominent members of the primatology and anthropological worlds were in the room, as the discussion presented viewers with detailed and often fascinating comparisons between apes and humans (Great Ape Trial 1995).

Several of the speakers participating in the debate have been instrumental in what has come to be known as the Great Ape Project, a global effort that has brought together scientists to advocate for fair and humane treatment for apes and possibly, by extension, for other species as well. The Great Ape Project has a goal that appears ennobling: extending human rights, specifically, the rights of life, liberty, and freedom from torture, to the great apes, with whom we form, in its terms, "a community of equals" (Cavaliere and Singer 1993).

The argument has been articulated in two principal forums: an edited volume (Cavaliere and Singer 1993) and a television staged debate (Great Ape Trial 1995). In the debate, although several participants invoked the genetic

similarity of humans and apes as an argument for the allocation of human rights to the apes, that argument is easily dismissed, as we do not allot rights on the basis of genetic distance. If the apes merit "human rights," an obvious question is what we mean by "human." To the extent that the question is answerable zoologically as participation in a reproductive community, gene pool, or evolutionary lineage called *Homo sapiens*, then the central claim would simply be irrational. Apes cannot get human rights since they are not human (Marks 2000).

If by "human," however, we mean something less tangible and more abstract, an attainable spirit or mind, perhaps, then it may legitimately be asked to what extent the apes approximate it. We will maintain that regardless of the zoological absurdity implied by extending human rights to nonhumans, no rational person can be in favor of the maltreatment, torture, or murder of these animals. The discourse on great apes rights, however, contains an ominous undercurrent that bears noting.

An example of this undercurrent appeared early in the program as the lawyer Robin Allen rose to defend rights for apes. Why should we not give apes rights he argued. After all:

We give human rights to children, to the aged and to the mentally infirm, to the autistic, to the deaf and to the dumb. . . . the facts we recognize in common humanity compel us to recognize the humanity in the great apes. . . . they can reason and communicate at least as well as some of the children and disabled humans to whom we accord human rights.

This linking of apes and children, the elderly, and humans with disability has been made with increasing frequency over the course of the last few years, a fact on which the Great Ape Project has begun to capitalize. The obvious strategy here is to humanize the apes by calling attention to the diversity of the human condition, at least from a behavioral and sensory standpoint.

For example, although Christoph Anstötz's essay entitled "Profoundly Intellectually Disabled Humans and Great Apes: A Comparison" begins with the caution, "the ethical import of the comparison is, of course, not intended to undermine the excellent progress made in extending equality to the intellectually disabled," the author then goes on to state:

There is nothing that humans with the most serious intellectual disabilities can do or feel that chimpanzees or gorillas cannot; moreover, there is much that a chimpanzee or a gorilla can do that a profoundly mentally disabled human cannot do. [Anstötz 1993:165]

The author then proceeds to elaborate on how an ape's ability to communicate, reflect, and learn outdistances the ability of those humans with severe disabilities to perform similar tasks (a debatable oversimplification in its own right). One may legitimately wonder whether the association of rights with behavioral or cognitive capabilities implies that a test could be developed, the flunking of which would result in the non-humanity of the subject.

Nor is this facile linking of apes and those with disability an isolated example. In their book *Should the Baby Live?*, Kuhse and Singer state: "Pigs, cows and chickens have a greater capacity to relate to others, better ability to communicate and far more curiosity than most severely retarded humans" (1985:122). The problem is that the comparison is a two-way street. If animals are significantly like disabled humans, than disabled humans are like animals. This recalls, of course, the *scala naturae*, or Great Chain of Being, a linear hierarchy in which social and zoological value was intimately linked. Invariably, such ranking has implied a curtailment of civil or human rights for those people at the bottom, who are thereby animalized.

### Historical Perspective

Making comparisons between humans with disability and other species is not scientifically new. Indeed, it was a hallmark of the eugenics movement in American biology. This mode of thought can be found throughout nineteenth-century American science. For example, Redden, in one of

the first books to look systematically at those who were deaf, wrote:

The deaf and dumb are guided almost wholly by instinct and their animal passions. They have no more opportunity for cultivating the intellect and reasoning facilities than the savages of Patagonia or the North American Indians. [1858:177]

A leading human geneticist in the early part of the twentieth century wrote:

Lack of speech, inability to care for the person or to respond in conventional fashion to the calls of nature, failure to learn the art of dressing and undressing, inability to count, entire lack of ambition beyond getting a meal, abject slothfulness, love of sitting by the hour picking at pieces of cloth—these are unfortunate traits for a twentieth century citizen, but they constitute a first-rate mental equipment for our remote ape-like ancestors, nor do we pity infants, who invariably have them. . . . In a word, the traits of the feeble-minded and the criminalistic are normal traits for infants and for an earlier stage in man's evolution. [Davenport 1911:262]

A popular and influential 1916 book argued for involuntary sterilization of "an ever widening circle of social discards, beginning always with the criminal, the diseased and the insane, and extending gradually to types which may be called weaklings rather than defectives and perhaps ultimately worthless race types" (Grant 1916:46–47).

A widely used college textbook of genetics from 1925 argued that "even under the most favorable surroundings there would still be a great many individuals who are always on the border line of self-supporting existence and whose contribution to society is so small that the elimination of their stock would be beneficial" (Sinnott and Dunn 1925:125).

The successive dehumanizing of individuals with disabilities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries increasingly stirred and then justified action in the real world. Fear of "animal-like behavior" and "animal nature" led to the lifelong institutionalization of growing numbers of individuals with disabilities (Trent 1994). Thousands of individuals with disabilities, both in the United States and in Europe, were sterilized without their consent and often against their wishes in order to control their "animal passion." This included thousands who today would be considered to have relatively minor disabilities (Gould 1981, 1984; Trent 1994). Indeed, such sterilization laws were in existence in half of the United States until recent years and are still frequently found and enforced in some other nations (Kern 1998).

With such arguments, it is perhaps not surprising that by the late 1930s, as the Nazis organized for the coming war, the German medical establishment began to systematically eliminate what they termed "useless eaters." By 1945, 300,000 German citizens with disabilities (85% of those who had resided in institutions before the War) had been systematically eliminated. Another 400,000 (1 in every

100 Germans) had been sterilized. The vast majority of these individuals were not members of any ethnic or minority group, but from "pure" German stock (Barondess 1996; Gallagher 1990; Sidel 1996).

Some ethicists and many Disability Rights advocates argue that modern genetic counseling and amniocentesis (with the expectation that "imperfect" fetuses will be eliminated) perpetuate much the same line of reasoning (Fine and Asch 1988; Finger 1990; Fletcher 1997).

Singer, in his 1990 book *Animal Liberation*, continued this strong link with eugenics when he argues:

Once we ask why it should be that all human beings—including infants, the intellectually disabled, criminal psychopaths, Hitler, Stalin and the rest—have some kind of dignity or worth that no elephant, pig or chimpanzee can ever achieve, we see the question is as difficult to answer as our original request for some relevant fact that justified the inequities of humans and other animals. [1995:239]

The philosopher Frey, in his discussion of vivisection, although arguing vehemently against Singer, falls into the same trap, accepting without question the presumed links between those with severe disability and animals of other species. He reasons: "I have and know of nothing which enables me to say, a priori, that a human life of any quality, however low, is more valuable than an animal life of any quality, however high" (1983:96). Based on this reasoning, he concludes that the justification of experimentation on animals for the benefit of mankind would also lead one to conclude that experimentation on "humans whose quality of life is exceeded by or equal to that of animals" is acceptable if it is done with the intention of benefiting mankind.

### The Links

The reason we as anthropologists should be particularly concerned with these increasingly numerous comparisons between primates and other species and individuals with disabilities is not solely because of our longstanding and complex history with the eugenics movement. Over the past two decades there has been a growing awareness that individuals with disabilities are, in fact, often far more constrained by social limitations than by specific physical, intellectual, or sensory impairments.

A growing number of contributions to the anthropological literature underscore the fact that the disability cannot be divorced from its sociocultural context (Fine and Asch 1988; Ingstad and Whyte 1995; Groce 1985). There are marked differences cross-culturally in why people are believed to be born with or to acquire a disability (Scheer and Groce 1988). Societies differ in whether and to what extent children and adults with disability are included in social, educational, and religious practices, and in whether, when, and with whom individuals with disabilities are allowed to marry, to work, and to dwell (Helander 1993). The issue, as it turns out, is more complicated than being disabled or not

disabled. In different societies, the type of disability one has, one's gender, the socioeconomic class or caste the individual with disability is born into, whether one lives in an urban or a rural area, and numerous other variables very familiar to anthropologists all make a difference in the length and quality of life lived by those with disability (Groce 1998; Sygall and Lewis 1993).

For example, in a society that places great emphasis on an adult male's skill as a public speaker, those individuals born deaf are at a distinct disadvantage (Rengil and Jarrow 1993). Mobility impairments are of greater consequence in societies where farming or herding are the primary means of making a living, but they are of far lesser importance in societies where modern transportation and wheelchairs make moving from place to place less of a challenge and where desk jobs allow even those with significant mobility problems to provide well for themselves and their families (Ingstad and White 1995). On the other hand, in modern Western societies where educational achievements are highly valued and the ability to read, write, and speak well is important, many individuals with mild forms of mental retardation are clearly labeled as less capable than their peers by early childhood (Helander 1993; Ingstad and Whyte 1995). In societies where literacy rates are lower and manual labor jobs are the norm, such individuals are often better able to blend in with their nondisabled peers, even if they are believed to be less intellectually adept (Groce 1998).

In addition to an expanding research base, there has been an analogous shift in the political climate. Globally, there has been a growing Disability Rights Movement that has redefined many of the issues that surround disability. Issues that were formerly believed to be medical in nature have been reexamined from the perspective of civil and human rights. For example, the extremely low rates of employment among individuals with a wide range of disabilities in both the developing and the developed worlds have less to do with specific medical conditions of the individuals and far more to do with the fact that individuals with disabilities are routinely discriminated against for education, job training, and hiring (United Nations 1983, 1993). According to UNESCO, the global literacy rate for individuals with any type of disability is close to 3%; for women with disability it hovers near 1% (Helander 1993).

The growing field of disability studies over the past decade and a half also has asked significant questions about what it means to live with a disability in society (Linton 1998; Nagler 1993). Work such as that of Bogdan and Taylor (1987, 1989) has examined fundamental questions about what makes even the most severely disabled of fellow human beings important to their families, to their neighbors, and to their communities.

Given the history of the past century, the growing knowledge base we are amassing about disability through anthropology and other disciplines, and the human rights

perspective that has evolved through the international Disability Rights Movement (Baker 1993), the comparisons between apes and humans with disability made by the proponents of the Great Ape Project are not simply amusingly naive. The consequences of the arguments developed by Great Ape Project advocates must be considered carefully and in a broader context. In this day and age, when a looming financial health-care crisis in many countries, including our own, threatens to justify less care to those with "pre-existing conditions" and when the prioritizing of resources toward providing greater social support for those who are not disabled is being argued for by prominent health economists and some of our leading global organizations, (Murry and Lopez 1994, 1996; World Bank 1993), anthropologists and primatologists cannot ignore the possible consequences of the claims they make.

Nor should such comparisons be made lightly or with the evident amusement that a writer such as Doerr manifests when, in his essay "Apes and Essence," he notes:

Great apes function mentally at the level of children or impaired adults and thus should be as much a part of our moral community as our children. The sign-language-using female gorilla Koko has taken human I.Q. tests and scored variously from 71 to 91.7, which means she is smarter than some people we could name. [Doerr 1994:43]

While we doubt that most of those participating in the Great Ape Project would argue against improving the quality of life for individuals with disabilities, we should take note of the implications of their arguments. As history shows, when translated into the political arena, scientific-sounding arguments often serve as rationalizations for doing harm to the most vulnerable elements of society. As advocates of the Great Ape Project move beyond the walls of academia, appearing now on television and in feature articles on the front pages of the *New York Times* (Berreby 1997),<sup>1</sup> we must remind them that in their zeal to humanize the apes, activists should not draw analogies between humans with disabilities and nonhuman primates. If they seek to draw analogies, let it be with all humans, not only a select group.

If the arguments within the debate among our learned colleagues on the British television special had turned to a specific ethnic, minority, or "racial" group being more comparable to apes than others, there would have been an immediate hue and cry—hopefully beginning with those very scholars participating in the television session.

The current discussion within the Great Ape Project is a sad commentary on how little we as scholars know about individuals with disabilities either in our own societies or cross-culturally. In 1890, the distinguished linguistic authority Max Muller gave the opinion that "deaf-mutes, left to themselves, would rise no higher than orang-outangs," although "he immediately qualified this by declaring himself an agnostic as to the inner life of the deaf-mute", (Jenkins

1890:185). How far have we come as a field and as a society when the following statement by Michael Leahy could go unchallenged during the debate on British television:

one would argue that any lesser being (and this would include children, the mentally disabled, and, indeed, animals as well) . . . come into the realm not so much as "rights" as in "responsibilities" and "duties." Their protection comes in evidence of the duties that are accrued by and for the adults, and that's how animals and children and the mentally disabled can, in fact, fit into the whole business of human rights. It's not that in a straightforward sense (the term) human beings applies to these lesser beings so they fit in, as it were, directly. [Great Ape Trial 1995]

The fact that Dr. Leahy is arguing against equal rights for apes when he makes these remarks during the debate shows how easily scholars can be drawn into assumptions and stereotypes about those with disabilities wherever they stand on equity for nonhumans (Great Ape Trial 1995).

It is a perverse sense of morality, indeed, that seeks to blur the boundary between apes and people by dehumanizing those for whom human rights are often the most precarious.

### Note

1. If this appears far-fetched, it should be noted that although it was ultimately rejected, the government of New Zealand considered a great apes rights bill in 1999.

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